

Asarco's Arizona smelter producing illegal emissions

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Phoenix Business Journal by Jennifer A. Johnson, Reporter

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Asarco .. LLC's copper smelter in Hayden has been producing illegal emissions including arsenic, lead, chromium and seven other dangerous compounds for more than six years.

On Nov. 10, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a private administrative action to Asarco. That document was provided to National Public Radio and the Center for Public Integrity, and shows the Asarco smelter has been violating the Clean Air Act since at least June 2005. A smelter is a facility where raw copper is extracted from its ore.

The EPA's action could result in millions of dollars in fines for Asarco in a state where copper mining is big business. The Asarco smelter is owned by Mexico City-based mining giant Grupo Mexico. The EPA's move could be a big blow to other copper producers in the state as they face more scrutiny from the federal government. Arizona is the biggest copper producer in the nation.

Asarco executives said the smelter's emissions are well within the legal limits and they dispute the EPA order and findings.

According to the EPA, the Hayden smelter is a "major source" of hazardous air pollutants. That means the facility has the potential to produce 10 tons per year or more of both arsenic and lead compounds, individually, and 25 tons per year or more of a combination of hazardous air pollutants.

Asarco takes a different view. In a statement provided to the Phoenix Business Journal, the company said comprehensive tests at the smelter conducted under the oversight of the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality support Asarco's position that the smelter is only a "minor source" of hazardous air pollutants.

Tensions in towns near copper production often run high. Proponents of mining say it creates economic development and much-needed jobs. While activists and other locals say it is fraught with environmental challenges and causes serious health problems.